× 776 I was told that in spite of these encouragements a youth who has lost his favourite ox has to be pressed to partake of its cooked flesh, his friends saying to him 'What? Are they not all the cattle of God? And if he has taken one of them you must not refuse its flesh. Why do you sit moping?' I have also heard it said that if the owner refuses its flesh and puts his spear away in the rafters of his byre, the spear may cut his hand or leg some later day because it was put away as though useless. In any case, in the end no Nuer can resist meat. A Nuer once told me wistfully that a man's eye and heart are mournful at the death of his beast but his teeth and stomach are glad. Nuer say that the stomach prays to God independently of the heart.

× 776 ●777 576 In taking things God, as we have noted, takes only what is his, but he is compassionate and, as we have also noted, spares a man if he sees that he is poor and miserable (*can*). In talking about these matters with Nuer I received the impression that, while of course they like to be rich, they think it safer for a man not to have too much good fortune. Pride in the number of his children or cattle may cause God to take them away. For this reason Nuer show great uneasiness if their good fortune is so much as mentioned. It is proper to praise a man's moral qualities, to say that he is brave, generous, or kind, but it is more than rude to remark on his physical well-being, the size of his family, or the number and quality of his beasts and other possessions, for evil consequences may follow. It is what Nuer generally call *yop*. Thus to say to a man, 'Well, you *are* fat', may make him thin; and it is the ambition of every Nuer to be fat, though I have never seen one who achieved it. It is also very bad to praise a cow, especially to remark on its exceptional milk yield, because it may then cease to give milk. I was told that 'only when her husband has married a wife with a cow will a woman praise it', that is, after it has ceased to be her cow. It is also most dangerous to tell a lad who has recently been initiated that the cuts on his forehead are healing well, or indeed to make any allusion to them, because a comment may result in an unhealed spot festering anew. I was often in trouble with Nuer on counts of this kind. I was always reprimanded if I counted children, saying, for instance, 'Let me see, so-and-so has four children, has he not? So-and-so, so-and-so, so-and-so, and so-and-so.' On one occasion I was eating porridge with Nuer and complimented my host on the size of the meal. Every-

777 576

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

one was most embarrassed and I was later taken aside by a Nuer friend and told that I must never make such comments. On another occasion I got into trouble for asking a man in jest, and, I admit, in bad taste, whether it was food or beer inside him, for his belly was as tight as a drum. I was told that my question might well make the man sick, and one of those present said that once a man had remarked to him, 'Well, you are full', and shortly afterwards he was violently sick. The worst offence is to praise a baby. In referring to it one should use some such expression as '*giakeme*', 'this bad thing'. When blessing children by spitting on them, which is the Nuer manner of showing favour to a child, kinsmen, and more especially kinswomen, utter some opprobrious remarks, sometimes a string of obscenities, over them.

The idea here is not that of the evil eye (*peth*), though the two ideas may in some ways resemble one another and also overlap.[1] In Nuer opinion the evil eye is an act of covetousness or envy, whereas here, I think, the emphasis is on the danger of rejoicing in unusual good fortune lest it should be taken away. There is a feeling that God evens things out, so that if he helps the needy he may take away from those with superfluity. As I understood their view it expresses a certain uneasiness at attention being drawn to possessions lest pride should bring about retribution. That this is their view is further suggested by a number of their stories which relate how God punished presumptuousness. I mention only one in this place, a short myth which reminds us of the story of [illegible] from some foreign people or is a fairly recent creation of Nuer imaginative thought, because it is about the *Turuk*, Turks, and their rifles. The word *Turuk* means in Nuer, as it does in the languages of many of the black peoples of the Southern Sudan, all lighter-skinned northerners with whom they have had dealings during the last hundred years, that is, Turks, Egyptians, Arabs, and Nubians of the Northern Sudan, and ourselves and other Europeans. The 'Turks' compared their rifles to God's thunder, and there was a trial of strength between them and God. God made a huge mud image of an elephant and told the 'Turks' to shoot at it, which they did to no effect. God then brought clouds and darkness and thunder and lightning and smashed the image

[1] *Yop* is presumably the same word as the Shilluk *yuop* which Wilhelm Hofmayr (*Die Schilluk*, 1925, p. 101) translates by 'böse Blick'.

777 776 773 to dust and killed many of the 'Turks' as well because they had compared the rifle he had given them to his power. The point of this story is not merely that God was stronger than the 'Turks' but that he was in the right and the 'Turks' were at fault.

776 577 196 This brings me to an extremely important Nuer concept, an understanding of which is very necessary to a correct appreciation of their religious thought and practice. This is the concept of *cuong*. This word can mean 'upright' in the sense of standing, as, for example, in reference to the supports of byres. It is also used figuratively for 'firmly established', as in the phrase *'be gole cuong'*, 'may his hearth stand', which has the sense of *stet fortuna domus*. It is most commonly employed, however, with the meaning of 'in the right' in both a forensic and a moral sense. The discussion in what we would call legal cases is for the purpose of determining who has the *cuong*, the right, in the case, or who has the most right; and in any argument about conduct the issue is always whether a person has conformed to the accepted norms of social life, for, if he has, then he has *cuong*, he has right on his side. We are concerned with the concept here both because it relates directly to man's behaviour towards God and other spiritual beings and the ghosts and because it relates to God in a more indirect way, in that he is regarded as the founder and guardian of morality. Up to this point I have been describing Nuer ideas about the nature of God. I shall now describe their ideas about what God requires of them.

III

I do not want to suggest that God is thought to be an immediate sanction for all conduct, but I must emphasize that the Nuer are of one voice in saying that sooner or later and in one way or another good will follow right conduct and ill will follow wrong conduct. People may not reap their rewards for good acts and punishments for bad acts for a long time, but the consequences of both follow behind (*guor*) them and in the end catch up on those responsible for them. You give milk to a man when he has no lactating cows, or meat and fish to him when he is hungry, or you befriend him in other ways, though he is no close kinsman of yours. He blesses you, saying that your age-mates will die while

barren, or divorced, woman to men to tell them that they would live for ever, but, in delivering her message, she threw, instead of a piece of gourd, a potsherd into the water, and it sank. Almost fortuitous though this incident was, what had happened, as we have noted before, could not be made not to have happened. Men have to accept the consequences of actions whether they are deliberate or not. 776* 577 773 177

Hence when Nuer suffer misfortune they ponder how it may have come about, for it follows from what has just been said and from the fact we noted earlier that God is always in the right, that if misfortune comes to a man it is most likely on account of some fault. This is why on such occasions one hears so often in Nuer prayers and invocations the plaint 'what have we done?' or 'what evil have we done?' and why Nuer sacrifices are so often propitiations, expiations, atonements, and purifications. It is therefore probable that suffering usually entails a measure of guilt. Nuer search their consciences to discover what fault might have brought it on them, though this is more evident when a misfortune is only pending and may yet be stayed or though it has fallen may yet be mitigated, for if the fault can be determined they will know better what action to take. When the misfortune is complete and their condition can in no way be alleviated they are less interested in its cause and accept its accomplishment with sorrow and resignation. 776* 577 782 777●

When Nuer suffer they sometimes at once know what is the cause of their suffering because they are well aware of some particular fault. They sometimes, as we would say, tempt God by doing what they know to be wrong, hoping that it will not matter very much, such as having relations with a woman which are incestuous but not very incestuous. If trouble comes they know that this is the cause, for they have said that whether the relationship was too close for congress would be decided by any consequences of it. They now discover that it was more serious than they thought. Nuer often neglect their duties to their various spirits. They omit or forget to sacrifice to them or they fail to dedicate cows to them or they use cows dedicated to them for marriage and find that they cannot replace them or do not trouble to do so. If a misfortune falls on them they then know that it is due to the anger of a spirit. Often, however, they are in doubt about the cause and confused and bewildered. It may be that the 776* 577 777

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

776 suffering is just something, like death in old age, which had to
577 happen. It may be due to a fetish or the evil eye. It may be the
777 outcome of a curse or the anger of a ghost. Nevertheless, Nuer generally appear to feel that suffering is due to some fault of theirs, and it is probable that there is always an element of this feeling in every situation of misfortune, whatever its immediate cause may be thought to be.

IV

782 I have discussed in a preliminary way the conception Nuer have of God, the ideas and feelings they have about their relations with him, and some of the actions they think bring about divine intervention in human affairs. I take these topics up again in succeeding chapters after the notion of Spirit has been broadened by an account of other spiritual conceptions. A brief consideration of some of the commoner expressions used in Nuer prayers may, however, be given now because they are used only when speaking to God.

For obvious reasons Nuer prayers are most commonly heard on public and formal occasions, generally in connexion with sacrifices. At any important sacrifice, and sometimes on other important occasions also, Nuer make long invocations, called *lawni*, about the event which gave rise to the occasion, and into these long rambling addresses are every now and again introduced short prayers, mostly petitionary prayers. These what we may call stock prayers are often strung together in strophes in a kind of Pater Noster, such as 'Our father, it is thy universe, it is thy will, let us be at peace, let the souls of the people be cool, thou art our father, remove all evil from our path', and so forth. However, there are no set form and order to these prayers, and each petition may be used separately and anywhere and at any time, and not only in invocations but also in private and spontaneous prayer, whether spoken or inward, and as pious ejaculations. If he is in any trouble or anxiety, the head of a Nuer household may pace up and down his kraal brandishing his spear and uttering some of these supplications: or, less formally, he may say them standing or squatting with his eyes turned towards heaven and his arms outstretched from the elbows, moving his hands, palms uppermost, up and down. They may also be uttered, if he says anything

They may also be uttered GOD if he says anything
at all, in the petition a man on a journey makes to God as he knots 782
grasses together at the side of a path, a practice Nuer call *tuc*. A 777
man may do this because he has knocked his 'bad foot' against a
stump in the path, for this presages misfortune, which can be
avoided by asking God to let the badness remain in the grass so
that the traveller may continue his journey with fortune. Each
man has a 'good (auspicious) foot' and a 'bad (inauspicious) foot'
and he learns which is which by experience. Nuer tie grass in the
same manner to ensure success in any enterprise for which a
journey is undertaken, often at the present day when they go to
buy or beg something from an Arab merchant. They ask God to
let them make a good bargain or that the merchant may make
them a gift.[1] Nuer may also utter these phrases of prayer at any
time as devout ejaculations, and not only when they are in trouble
or desire a boon, for they have told me that they like to speak to
God when they are happy (*loc tedh*) and because they are happy,
and that they often say a few words to him as they go about their
daily affairs.

I have already discussed the significance of some of these 782
prayerful words and expressions: 'our father', 'it is thy universe',
'it is thy will', and others. I will now consider the meaning of yet
a few others, choosing for the purpose the commonest petitionary
phrases. Before doing this I would draw attention to the fact that
the petitioner generally uses the first person plural. In private
ejaculations a Nuer may use such expressions as 'ah, my God',
'ah, God, what is this?', and 'let me journey well', but he will also
use the plural pronoun, and in prayers and invocations uttered in
public the plural is invariably used: 'let us be at peace', or what-
ever the expression may be.[2] I draw attention to this because it is
not, I believe, just an indication that there are other people on
whose behalf the speaker is asking God's favours. It is rather that
the occasions on which prayers are publicly offered are generally

[1] Some Nuer have told me that this custom of knotting grasses originated among the Dinka. It is found among some, if not all, the Dinka tribes (R. T. Johnston, 'The Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of the Bor Dinka', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1934, p. 126).

[2] There are two pronominal suffixes for the first person plural, *ke* and *ne*, which are respectively exclusive and inclusive. For example, 'baka ne', 'we shall go', includes the speaker and others but not the person or persons spoken to, whereas 'bawa ne', 'we shall go', includes also the person or persons spoken to. In speaking to God Nuer have, of course, to use the exclusive form. [193] [195]